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<http://www.kristv.com/story/29767627/toxic-spill-in-colorado-river-cleared-up-long-term-impact-uncertain>

Toxic spill in Colorado River cleared up, long-term impact uncertain

Knickmeyer

August 12, 8:15AM

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) - Russell Begaye stared into a hole in the side of a Colorado mountain, watching as yellow water contaminated with heavy metals poured out and raced down a slope toward a creek that feeds rivers critical to survival on the nation's largest Native American reservation and in other parts of the Southwest.

At the Gold King Mine, Begaye, president of the Navajo Nation, couldn't help but see the concerned faces of his people - the farmers who no longer had water for corn crops and the ranchers who had to scramble to get their cattle, sheep and goats away from the polluted San Juan River.

"We were told that the water was clearing up and getting back to normal," he said. "This is what EPA was telling us. We wanted to go up there as close as we could to the source. We wanted our people to see the water is still yellow."

Begaye and a small contingent of Navajo officials worked their way unannounced past barriers and up the mountain over the weekend to get a closer look at the mine blowout that federal officials said sent more than 3 million gallons of water laden with lead, arsenic and other metals down the Animas River and into the San Juan River.

The 100-mile plume has since traveled through parts of Colorado, New Mexico and Utah on the way to Lake Powell, a key source of water for the Southwest.

All along the way, signs are posted warning people to stay out of the water. Farmers have stopped irrigating and communities have closed water intake systems. Bottled water on the Navajo Nation is becoming scarce.

Begaye said his tribe is bearing the brunt of the massive spill that was accidentally unleashed by EPA workers inspecting the long-idled Gold King mine near Silverton, Colorado, on Aug. 5. Two-thirds of the San Juan River crosses Navajo land before reaching Lake Powell.

"This is a huge issue," Begaye said. "This river, the San Juan, is our lifeline, not only in a spiritual sense but also it's an economic base that sustains the people that live along the river.

"When EPA is saying to me it's going to take decades to clean this up, that is how long uncertainty will exist as we drink the water, as we farm the land, as we put our livestock out there near the river," he said. "That is just, to me, a disaster of a huge proportion."

Frustration is mounting throughout the Four Corners region among officials and residents who say the EPA has moved too slowly and hasn't been forthcoming about the dangers of the spill. The Navajo Nation feels even more slighted given its status as a federally recognized tribe and sovereign nation.

Begaye said he has yet to receive a call from President Barack Obama. "It seems like the Obama administration just closed their doors and disappeared," he said.

On Wednesday, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy planned to tour sites in New Mexico and Colorado affected by the spill. She called it a tragic and unfortunate incident, saying the EPA was taking responsibility to ensure the mess was cleaned up.

"I am absolutely, deeply sorry that this ever happened," she said Tuesday in Washington.

The EPA has said the current flows are too fast for the contaminants to pose an immediate health threat, and that the heavy metals will likely be diluted over time so they don't pose a longer-term threat, either.

Tests show some of the metals have settled to the bottom of the rivers and would dissolve only if conditions became acidic, which experts say isn't likely.

Fish testing was going on Tuesday in the Animas River near Durango, Colorado, with biologists working to determine the leak's impact on fish.

"We didn't have a big fish kill in the river," said Jim White, an aquatic biologist with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. "The one thing we don't know is sort of long term impacts to the aquatic community out here in general."

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper visited a contaminated stretch of the Animas and said he hopes a "silver lining" to the disaster will be a more aggressive state and federal effort to deal with mining's "legacy of pollution" across the West.

On the Navajo Nation, some 30,000 acres of crops are in danger without irrigation. Farmers also worry about contaminating their irrigation ditches once the gates are reopened, and ranchers are looking for assurances that livestock won't be exposed to contaminants each time they wade into the river and kick up sediment while getting a drink.

Navajo farmers are in the middle of alfalfa season and without rain, tribal officials say they will be in trouble. They have been flooding the airwaves and social media with Navajo-language public service announcements to keep people updated.

Federal officials have said they are working to review and analyze data gathered from samples taken along the two rivers.

McCarthy said Tuesday that initial results show high levels of contaminants in the water have been diminishing as the plume moves downstream. Workers have built four ponds at the mine site to capture and treat additional discharges, she said.

Heavy metals from Gold King and other defunct mines in Colorado have been leaching out and killing fish and other species for decades as rain and snowmelt spills from abandoned, exposed sites.

The EPA has considered making part of the Animas River in Colorado a Superfund site for a quarter-century.

The designation would have provided more resources for a cleanup, but some people in Colorado opposed the status, fearing the stigma and federal strings attached, so the EPA agreed to allow local officials to lead cleanup efforts instead.

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CBS

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/colorado-river-mine-spill-site-inspected-epa-administrator-other-officials/>

U.S., state officials to visit tainted Colorado river

CBS News

August 12, 6:54 AM

Several officials will be visiting Colorado and New Mexico Wednesday to inspect the damage from the Gold King Mine spill.

The head of the EPA, Gina McCarthy, as well as attorneys general from Colorado, New Mexico and Utah all plan to personally inspect the river, reports CBS News correspondent Mireya Villarreal.

EPA takes blame for Colorado mine waste spill

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper visited a contaminated stretch of the Animas River

Tuesday and admitted that, while he's disappointed with the EPA, he's focused on the cleanup.

"Everyone's angry. I was angry. That said, our primary role right now is, that's behind us, and how are we going to move forward?" Hickenlooper said.

Even though the water looks normal now, over the past week, a plume of pollution with metals including arsenic and lead has marched at least 100 miles downstream.

In Washington D.C. Tuesday, EPA administrator McCarthy apologized for the spill.

"It pains me to no end see this happening, but we're working tirelessly to respond and have committed to a full review of exactly what happened," she said.

Preliminary tests show the water quality is returning to where it was in Durango, Colorado, before the accident. Still, the river will need to be monitored for years to come.

The spill is affecting people like Charlie Noone, who makes a living off the waters.

"We've had some cancellations, for sure. It's been tough, because a lot of people do come to Durango to fish the Animas," the fishing guide said. "It's a beautiful river. Not right now, but usually, it's really beautiful."

With businesses and families waiting for the all-clear, Hickenlooper said he hopes the county sheriff will be able to reopen the river as soon it's safe.

"I want to have that information in his hands the moment we have it -- in minutes, not in hours, not in days. The moment we have it," he said.

Hickenlooper said this spill should serve as a turning point for the EPA and how it handles mine-cleanups.

In Colorado alone, there are an estimated 23,000 abandoned mines.

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LA Times

<http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-colorado-river-spill-20150811-story.html>

States downstream from contaminated river upset that EPA didn't alert them

John M. Glionna and Matt Pearce

August 11, 7:13 PM

As the Environmental Protection Agency continued to monitor 3 million gallons of mine waste released into Colorado's Animas River, residents in two states downstream decried the federal agency Tuesday, saying it failed to alert them to mustard-colored sludge headed their way.

Officials for New Mexico's San Juan County Office of Emergency Management said they learned of the oncoming rush of wastewater laden with lead, arsenic and other heavy metals not from the EPA, but in a newspaper in nearby Durango, Colo.

In Page, Ariz., Mayor Bill Diak said that when he contacted EPA officials to attend an emergency community meeting Monday, the agency said no one was available. Agency officials responded only after Diak called his congresswoman in Washington, he said.

"We told her, 'Hey, this really is a concern to us and the EPA doesn't have time to talk to us,'" Diak said. "They dropped the ball — using the media to get the word out."

On Tuesday, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said her agency took full responsibility for the spill caused by federal and contract workers cleaning up the defunct Gold King Mine above the town of Silverton, Colo. McCarthy, who planned to visit affected areas Wednesday, said the spill "pains me to no end. I am absolutely, deeply sorry this ever happened."

By late Tuesday, the leading edge of the spill was eight miles west of Farmington, N.M., more than 100 miles from the disaster site. Parts of the Animas and San Juan rivers have been declared disaster areas, as governors from Colorado and New Mexico conducted visits to communities that have shut off outtake valves from the polluted waterways.

In a news conference held at an agency command center in Durango, EPA officials said workers were treating the 500 to 700 gallons of tainted water still leaking from the Gold King Mine.

Though the EPA said stretches of the Animas south of the spill were clearing, residents described orange-colored silt on the river bottom and shoreline in many places. The agency will continue to monitor the silt “for years to come,” EPA officials said, noting that sediment would be stirred up by rainfall or spring runoff.

The plume was expected to reach Lake Powell this week, but the pollutants were not expected to threaten the lake or Colorado River-fed drinking water for Western states including California.

Justyn Liff, a Colorado spokeswoman for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, said the 3-million-gallon spill was about the size of 4 1/2 Olympic-sized pools. Lake Powell, she said, contained 4.2 trillion gallons of water, comparable to 6.4 million Olympic-sized pools.

Mic Stewart, director of water quality for the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, agreed that the contamination would take years to hit the region, if ever.

“The event [happened] about 850 miles upstream of us, so we have a couple factors in our favor,” he said. “It’s a long distance away.”

In Colorado, the state parks and wildlife department continued to monitor fish placed in the Animas River near Durango to gauge health effects of the sludge. The agency placed scores of rainbow trout fingerlings from a local hatchery into the river at three locations.

“So far, they’re surviving,” said spokesman Matt Robbins. “As for the wildlife that might be drinking this water, we don’t know.”

Communities that rely on the Animas and the San Juan for water say the spill has upset their way of life.

Michele Truby-Tillen, a spokeswoman for the San Juan County Office of Emergency Management in New Mexico, said people who drew their water directly from the Animas River had been coming into nearby Farmington to take showers. Officials have blocked farmers from irrigating crops with river water and have ordered thousands of well owners to have their water tested.

“People ask, ‘Is this going to affect our health and welfare for the next 10 years?’ All we say is to take this one day at a time. The long term will have to wait,” she said.

She criticized the EPA for not giving residents warning that the flood of polluted water was coming their way. “If they had done that, farmers and well-users could have drawn out as much clean water as they could before this set upon us,” she said. “But that didn’t happen.”

The attorneys general of New Mexico, Colorado and Utah plan to visit the spill site on Wednesday and discuss potential “legal remedies,” according to the New Mexico attorney general's office.

“I’m not taking anything off of the table. Right now we have people preparing for a lawsuit, if that is what we need to do,” Republican New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez said in a Tuesday appearance on Fox News.

Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper, a Democrat, also criticized the EPA in a televised news conference in Durango, albeit with a softer tone.

“When we have an incident like this, it is, in every sense, unacceptable,” he said. But

Hickenlooper, while promising accountability, declined to condemn the agency, saying the EPA's intentions — to treat the wastewater in the mine — were good.

Jared Blumenfeld, an EPA spokesman in San Francisco, said the agency was investigating why it took 24 hours for officials to notify governors in affected states of the spill.

"There are 300 miles of river between the incident and Lake Powell. On fast-moving issues we focus on the most affected areas first," he said. "But today we are coordinating better than we did at first."

In Page in northern Arizona, residents wait with a sense of dread for the oncoming pollution.

On Monday, Mayor Diak held an unusual meeting attended by 150 residents, many of whom questioned EPA officials who phoned into the event.

"People were concerned over their drinking water," Diak said of the town of 9,000 residents. "The doomsday people were predicting the price of water to rise."

But Diak hoped Lake Powell would hold its own.

"Remember, this is a big lake with 1,900 miles of coastline, more than the entire West Coast of the U.S.," he said. "Bottom line, this is like adding one drop of water with red dye into a pool of 15,000 gallons. So just try and find the red dye."

NBC

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/week-after-toxic-river-spill-impact-west-remains-unclear-n407896>

A Week After Toxic River Spill in Colorado, Environmental Impact Remains Unclear

Jon Schuppe

August 11, 6:35PM

Last Wednesday, Environmental Protection Agency workers cleaning up a defunct gold mine in southwestern Colorado mistakenly unleashed a torrent of toxic wastewater, sending the chemical-laden plume into the Animas River, turning it bright yellow and forcing officials to close it off.

About three millions gallons of the polluted sludge churned into the river, moving downstream to the town of Durango, on to New Mexico and toward Lake Powell in Utah, raising all sorts of questions about the immediate and long-term impact on the drinking water, wildlife and the local economy.

This is what is known so far:

What was in the toxic wastewater?

The plume contained concentrated levels of heavy metals, including lead, iron, zinc and manganese, as well as arsenic. It was the iron that turned the river the color of mustard.

How polluted is the river now?

State and federal officials say that the spike of toxins lasted about eight hours. Since then, the EPA has built four collection ponds at the mine site, where it is treating the water in order to reduce acidity levels and remove dissolved metals. Officials say the pollutants have now dissipated to the point that the river near the spill point is returning to normal water-quality levels — and is regaining its greenish-blue hue. But the contaminants will eventually settle in the river bed, and could be kicked back up during rainstorms.

How long will the pollution stick around?

Jeff Curtis, a University of British Columbia scientist and water quality expert, said he expected two waves of toxins to move downstream from the spill. The first wave comprises water-soluble pollutants, including arsenic and cadmium, freely flowing with the river's current. The second wave of less soluble materials, including lead, will settle in river basin sediment and be churned up by later rainstorms.

That means that the full impact of the spill will take years, perhaps decades to unfold, as the toxins continue to move through the ecosystem. Fish will bear the brunt of the contamination, poisons slowly accumulating in their bodies.

The effect on humans will take much longer to measure, Curtis said.

What's been the impact on drinking water?

Officials in Durango, the first town downstream from the spill, moved quickly to shut off its intake valve from the Animas. Tap water there is considered safe to drink, but because the town is now relying on the Florida River for its supply, officials are urging people to conserve. Residents and farmers who rely on wells were switched to alternative sources.

Seven water systems in Colorado and New Mexico may also be affected, as the river carries the contaminants closer to the Colorado River, which feeds much of the West.

What about wildlife?

Officials are still trying to figure out how the spill has affected animals and fish. Tests have not turned up any widespread deaths of fish, or of insects that the fish eat.

When will the Animas River reopen?

The EPA said it did not anticipate making any decision about making the river available for public use until at least Aug. 17.

Has the leak at the mine itself been stopped?

Contaminated runoff is still flowing from the abandoned Gold King Mine, the Durango Herald newspaper reported.

How many of these mines are out there?

The Gold King Mine is one of thousands of mines that drove the local economy until the early-20th century. All are now closed. Some are now tourist attractions. All maintain a toxic legacy, as groundwater flows through the old tunnels and picks up pollutants.

How did the spill happen?

Locals have been debating how to stem the flow of hazardous chemicals from the mines, but resisted allowing the EPA to declare the mines a federal Superfund site, fearing the impact on the economy. Instead, the EPA decided on a softer approach: go into the worst of the abandoned mines, measure the level of pollution, treat the sludge and figure out whether more remediation was necessary. That's what an EPA crew was doing at Gold King Mine on Aug. 5, when it accidentally broke through a mound of material blocking the tunnel, letting loose the toxic plume.

Who's paying for the cleanup?

The details are far from clear. But it's assumed that the EPA will end up the focus of millions of dollars in claims. In the short term, federal and state officials are shouldering the immediate costs of responding to the spill.

Reuters

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/12/usa-colorado-spill-idUSL1N10M1JV20150812>

CORRECTED-UPDATE 1-Restrictions to remain for rivers hardest hit by Colorado mine waste spill

Steve Gorman

August 11, 9:36 PM

Aug 11 (Reuters) - New Mexico officials have joined Colorado in declaring an emergency due to toxic wastewater spewing from an abandoned gold mine, a spill that prompted authorities to close two rivers to drinking water and irrigation intakes for at least another week.

The San Juan River and its northern tributary, the Animas River, have been fouled by the release of more than 3 million gallons (11.3 million liters) of acid mine drainage inadvertently triggered by a team of Environmental Protection Agency workers last Wednesday.

The discharge has continued to flow at the rate of about 500 gallons (1,900 liters) a minute from the site of the century-old Gold King Mine, near the town of Silverton in southwestern Colorado, into a stream below called Cement Creek.

From there, the wastewater has washed into the Animas River and into the San Juan River in northwestern New Mexico.

The bright orange contamination plume, containing heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury and lead, has dissipated through dilution as it spreads downstream, with its leading edge no longer visible from aerial surveys, the EPA said.

"From initial sampling, as the plume has advanced, we are seeing elevated levels (of contaminants), but as it moves on we are seeing a downward trajectory toward pre-event conditions," EPA chief Gina McCarthy said at a clean-energy event in Washington.

The Animas River in Durango, Colorado, about 50 miles (80 km) south of the spill, had turned bright, lime green by Sunday, and was a darker shade of blue-green by Tuesday, a sign that pollutants were gradually clearing, at least near the surface, said Sinjin Eberle, a spokesman for the conservation group American Rivers.

But experts said a long-term concern was the deposit of heavy metals from the spill that had settled into river sediments, where they can be churned up and unleash a new wave of pollution when storms hit or rivers run at flood stage.

An unspecified number of residents who live downstream from the mine and draw their drinking supplies from private wells have reported water discoloration, but there has been no immediate evidence of harm to humans, livestock or wildlife, according to EPA officials.

Still, residents have been advised to avoid drinking or bathing in water drawn from wells in the vicinity, and the government is working to supply water as needed to homes, ranches and farms.

Two Colorado municipalities, including the city of Durango, and the New Mexico towns of Aztec and Farmington have shut off their river intakes, the EPA said.

POSSIBLE LEGAL ACTION AGAINST EPA

EPA officials said the Animas and San Juan rivers would remain closed until at least next Monday to such uses as the supply of drinking and irrigation water, and fishing and recreation as experts try to gauge safety risks posed by the spill.

Wastewater still escaping from the mine site was being diverted into hastily built settling ponds where the effluent is treated before it empties into Cement Creek, sharply reducing its acidity and metal levels, the EPA said.

New Mexico Governor Susana Martinez declared a state of emergency on Monday, freeing up an additional \$750,000 for disaster response, and said she was directing her administration to "be prepared to take legal action against the EPA."

Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper declared his own "state of disaster" emergency on Monday, and vowed to take actions to "make sure this doesn't happen again."

Colorado has more than 4,000 abandoned mines, about 1,100 of them around Silverton, according to American Rivers, which calls those sites "ticking time bombs."

The Navajo Nation has also been affected. Its sprawling reservation is traversed by the San Juan River, which flows through southeastern Utah into Lake Powell.

It was uncertain how far significant contamination from the spill would travel, but EPA officials said on Tuesday the leading edge of the original burst of contamination had moved well beyond Farmington.